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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews educational problems affecting American Indian students, particularly problems related to school climate, and describes efforts to improve school climate at Bennett County (South Dakota) High School. This public school serves the county and two reservations. It also accepts transfer students from Bureau of Indian Affairs schools in three states. Over half of the students are Lakotas (Sioux). As in other similar schools, problems include poor communication between teachers and some Indian students, poor relationships between the school and Indian parents, lack of Indian teachers, racial distrust, high Indian poverty rates, language problems, cultural differences between students and teachers, low participation in extracurricular activities by Indian students, alcohol abuse, student alienation, and low student self-esteem. Approaches to these problems by other school districts have included multicultural curriculum reform, efforts to make materials and course content more culturally relevant to Indian students, using more experiential teaching methods, and alcohol education. Bennett County High School instituted the following activities: (1) contracts with students not to drink or use drugs; (2) an advisor-advisee program; (3) cultural programs involving school and community; (4) school climate inventories completed by students and teachers; (5) putting arts and other extracurricular activities on an equal footing with sports; (6) serving Native American food in school lunches; (7) the Human Rights Education Program; and (8) the Student Problem Identification and Resolution Program. (SV)

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OKICIYAPO HECHEL LENA OYATE KIN NIPI KTE
"Help Each Other That These People May Live"

Facilitating academic attainment in adolescent Sioux students in the public school systems in South Dakota

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Spring 1992

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Joyce Sprenger

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

"In the future your business dealings with the whites are going to be very hard, and it behooves you to learn well what you are taught here. But that is not all. We older people need you. In our dealings with the white man, we are just the same as blind men, because we do not understand them. We need you to help us understand what the white men are up to. My Grandchildren, be good. Try and make a mark for yourselfs (sic). Learn all you can."

--Sitting Bull
(Oglala Lakota College--1988-89 Catalog)

PURPOSE

As an Anglo woman (also known in some student circles as "honkie") teaching in a school system in South Dakota where I was in the minority, I asked myself some questions that had not previously concerned me. If I can learn to live and think in a multicultural manner, which I honestly believe I do, then what can I contribute to others who are not of this mind set. What about those kids who are in the majority, but choose not to stay in school, because they don't feel like the majority? Those who are taught by Anglo teachers who teach the Euro-centric history of America?

The second year I taught in Bennett County, there was an intensified movement to improve school climate from the previous year's feeling of antagonism that seemed to hang in the air of the hallways. It may be that the reason behind this group effort of administration, faculty and students was the fact that our principal was being considered for the South Dakota Principal of the Year. The reason is not important. The fact is, we did something to work on improving our school climate, and what we did worked. We had a mission.

BACKGROUND

Most Oglala Sioux live on or near the Pine Ridge Reservation near the southwestern corner of South Dakota. The

reservation itself is an inverted L-shape, and to the east is Rosebud reservation, home of the Brule' and Rosebud Sioux. To the South is the Nebraska line, and in the center of this area is Bennett County. The only high school in the county is in Martin, a public school in a town of about 1,000 people. Feeding the school are the public middle/elementary school in that town, three country schools (K-8) in the county, and the BIA schools in Shannon County at Batesland and American Horse School at Allen.

Bennett County High School had a Lakota population of 53% and the elementary school had a 75% population in 1988. Neither the Native or white students always live with their parents, but may live with relatives (my sister-in-law's grandmother is also my grandmother) or friends or board in town. They may come from as far away as the canyons west of Manderson, which is 80 miles away and in the district, or from any of the BIA or contract schools in the state or in North Dakota or Nebraska. BIA schools regularly transferring students in include Red Cloud, Pine Ridge, Kyle and Wanblee.

Racial mixing began with the French trappers, and last names such as Bissonette, Roubideaux and Shangreaux are apparent. Other ethnic groups, such as Hispanic, are discernible in names such as Hernandez, Gonzales and Zimiga. Intermarriage is not common between full-bloods and whites but is found fairly often between mixed-bloods and whites. The most common mixed-bloods are of different tribes or bands, and they are not necessarily mixed with whites, blacks or Hispanics.

All Native Americans do not persist in the use of the last name given them by the Indian Agency, or other white governmental agency, and some may be known by two or three different last names. They also shorten their names, i.e. Wyatt White Horse from Wyatt (I don't know his Indian first name) Runs With White Horses. Students do not often use their Indian first names in public school unless to sign art work, and often shorten multiple-word last names to only their initials, i.e. Stephanie Flying Horse to Stephanie F.H.

Many Indians view whites (washichu) with suspicion. As a rule, the less assimilated the Indian, the higher the instance of suspicion. Many have resigned themselves to being in dependent positions but resent those positions. In order to survive and retain their Indian identity, many have learned the art of manipulation. There is the face to be used with washichu and the face for family and friends. Because of a difference in communicating, the Indians are not completely honest with the washichu and the Whites have deluded themselves into believing they are helping the Indians and that they have a say in their policy making (Maynard and Twiss, 1969). These opinions were written in 1969, but things had not changed in a measurable way in the following 20 years.

Throughout history, educational researchers found Native American students to have lower self-esteem in school than white counterparts, to exhibit lower achievement and intelligence, and more alienation toward school (Miller, 1969). There seems to be little difference today.

SETTING THE SCENE

In the public schools near large populations of Native American students, the overwhelming majority of teachers and administrators is white. A major complaint of Indian parents is that there are no Indian teachers to teach their children. This, coupled with the allegation that the teachers and administration don't care about their children, was a major complaint of a group of Indian parents who met with the school board in Bennett County in September 1991. Antagonism was to the point that Indian parents held their children out of school the first week, and many (about 40) have since transferred to other schools (Whitford, 1992).

As many as 91-95% of Indian students report that white teachers do not like them (Kirkness, 1986). It has been my experience that many of those students have made up their minds based on something other than the teacher as a person. The white teachers must first prove themselves to be fair, caring, nor-discriminating, non-threatening, and have been known to occasionally say, "You wouldn't say that to me, if I was Indian." It is not always a case of the white discriminating against the Indian.

In introducing a new class in Minority History at Bennett County High School in 1989, the format called for one nine-week unit of study of the history and culture of selected African nations and one of Plains Indians, especially the Sioux. About 15 students enrolled in the class, and it was about 2/3 Native

Americans. For the most part, they were very interested in learning about African nations and watching the films and videos, especially the one about chasing down and skinning the giraffe with the one-foot-thick skin (complete with blood and gore). When it came time for the unit on Native Americans, the white students were attentive and participated and the Indian ones tuned it out. I didn't ever figure out whether this was due to the fact that they thought I had no business trying to teach this unit (as if I was more qualified to teach African history?) or if they truly were not interested in most of it, with the exception of the standoff at Wounded Knee between AIM and the FBI in 1973. It was a learning experience for me, because I have never seen the Indian side of American history, as this is not the usual perspective taken by history books in the rest of the country.

The general consensus was that there appeared to be more distance between the "haves' and "have-nots" in school than between the two racial groups. "Nationally, more Sioux Indians are living in poverty (43.5%) than any other group of American Indians in the Nation. The current official poverty level is $10,609 a year for a rural family of four. Given this definition, 45% of all American Indian families in South Dakota are below that threshold, compared to 12% of all white South Dakota families" (Argus Leader, 1985).

There is a much greater gap between students coming into public school off the reservations than those who grew up in or near town and their white counterparts. There is also a

correlation in school in the degree of comfort experienced by those who live in houses where English is spoken and those who live in households where Lakota is the language. Some students are bi-lingual, and translate in their heads during class until they achieve the ability to think in English. This does not do anything for the students' ability to communicate orally or in writing, and further removes them from Indian and white students who use English primarily or exclusively.

The student who sits at his or her desk, looking down, refusing to answer with called on, creates the impression that the answer to the question is not known. For students who have been taught to respect their elders, not to be put on the spot in front of others, to be non-competitive, and who may be translating from their native language into English, school may be a frightening experience.

Native American students are sometimes thought to be lazy or slow learners by their non-Indian teachers, because the students are not accustomed to the rigidity of schedules and are taught, out of respect, not to look an adult in the eyes. It is usually easier and more comfortable to talk to those students who show respect by looking down, by sitting side by side, rather than face to face.

Throughout history, the purpose of educating the Indians has been to assimilate them into white culture. The Spanish established mission schools in the early 1500s in an attempt to "educate" America's Indians. In the Virginia colonies about a hundred years later, Indian boys were being taken into white

homes and educated or sent to Europe for the same purpose. This system continued through missionary boarding schools, forcing children to dress as Europeans, forbidding them to speak their native languages, and isolating them from their families. A resentment against the educational system grew and when they had children of their own, those children were not encouraged to be academic (Harlan, 1987).

Tim Giago, a Lakota Sioux, and publisher of the Lakota Times, writes about the fairly recent problems resulting from having education and religion forced on his people by the Jesuits and the Catholic Church. "Products of a Catholic Indian mission (Holy Rosary Indian Mission on the Pine Ridge Reservation), like me, they (his brother and the brother's friend) grew up full of anger and hatred. After they accepted the religious teachings and beliefs of the Lakota elders and went back to the traditional ways, their lives changed completely" (Giago, 1989).

Another example was demonstrated by the Lakota girl who transferred to Bennett County High School (Martin SD) at mid-semester, and was added to my roll in an art class. The girl did not ever come to class, and not hearing anyone say anything about her, I assumed she did not transfer. When I did ask about her a couple of days later, she had been in all her other classes but had been spending art class in the restroom. Apparently she looked in the window of the door, did not like what she saw, and decided the restroom was safer than the art room.

A problem for Indian adolescents attending public schools with non-Indians is the distances many of them have to travel. They are not able to participate in sports if there is not a late bus run to their home or if no one can come get them. Their social upbringing isolated them, and the non-competitiveness and sharing are more of a hindrance than a help. "As memories of the harsh educational practices of the past fade and Native American parents become more concerned with their children's education, more emphasis has been put on support systems for students...(including) after school-tutoring... (c)lasses in Native American culture have also been added (that) often teach the arts and crafts..." (Harlan, 1987).

Education after high school is becoming more important in some Indian communities, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs operates three colleges in Kansas and New Mexico. There are also the South Dakota Indian operated ones such as Sinte Gleska in Rosebud, Pia Wiconi at Kyle and the Oglala Lakota College in Martin. Sinte Gleska was the first tribal college in the nation to award a master's degree, in 1989.

There are 300,000 Native American students being educated today, with 83 percent in public schools and 17 percent in mission, BIA and contract schools (Chavers, 1991). A contract school is one run by the local people, not public and not BIA, with services contracted for.

Most Indians are taught exclusively in English, so that the school environment is completely different from the home where the native language may be spoken. Indian students today

have a choice of moving into the white world by doing well in school or doing poorly and continuing to live in poverty.

"Half of all Indian students drop out before completing high school and only 25 percent of those who graduate enroll in college, compared to over 40 percent of the nation: of those who do go to college, 65 percent leave without a degree" (Chavers, 1991).

WORKING ON SOLUTIONS

Many school districts are working toward an integration of ethnic content in order to mainstream curricula as opposed to the earlier separate ethnic studies courses and programs of the 1960s and 1970s. The Euro-centric canon was challenged by the civil rights movement of that period and later by the women's studies movement.

James Banks, a leading multiculturalist, says there is a powerful resistance to the multicultural curriculum reform, because developers of curricula have referred to ethnic and women's studies as "special interest," which is defined as a "person or group seeking to influence policy often narrowly defined" (Banks, 1991). He asserts that any ideas challenging the power, values and ideas of the dominant culture may be viewed as a special interest. He goes on to say, "Only curriculum that reflects the collective experiences and interests of a wide range of groups is truly in the national interest and consistent with the public good...It is imperative that curricula be transformed to help students view concepts, issues, and

problems from diverse cultural perspectives. Merely inserting ethnic and gender content into existing curricular structures... is not enough" (Banks, 1991).

Knowledge of other cultures is not enough to develop caring, empathy and commitment to a change. Students and teachers must also develop a commitment to act as well as to improve their knowledge and skills. Attitudes and actions of teachers, administrators and students may imply that one culture has superiority over another. The purpose of education is for each student to prepare to live in a multicultural society, not to turn all students into middle class white citizens. Knowledge of various cultures is necessary for students to learn to be independent and choose what they wish from each culture so they can feel successful.

Some major problem areas have been identified as to why Native American students are below average in attaining formal education:

Language arts and reading materials in use are not culturally relevant to most Indian students.

Most Indian students are below average on developing reading comprehension and language fluency when measured on norm-referenced standardized tests.

As many Indian students progress through the grades, they become less and less interested in school and school

activities. Dropout rates accelerate as they get older.

"Rapid City is...in the forefront of efforts to reach some goals of President Bush's Project 2000, such as closing the skills and knowledge gap between minority students and others," says (Ken) Burnham (principal of Rapid City Stevens High School) (Bennett County Booster, 1991). The school also teaches Indian art and has a mentorship program to help students who may be having problems with attendance, parents or transportation.

He went on to say between 25 and 28 percent of the Native American students in the Rapid City school system drop out, and that, "Some minorities don't learn the same way as other students do, so we've begun to look at how we can design programs that meet their needs. Some teachers even use minority students as part of presentations about their culture as a way of promoting multicultural education" (Bennett County Booster, 1991).

Many Indian students lack a positive self-image due to cultural conflicts and lack of academic success (Iyall, 1983). Often language at school is not the same as at home. The students' thought patterns and the teachers' may not mesh, so the school shuts out those from home. There is no communication. Suggestions for increased student performance in school include the opportunity to use that language they bring to school. Indian students, like all students, need to see relevance in what they are learning and their past experiences. They need support from parents and community members, and need to

understand similarities and differences of the cultural backgrounds of classmates.

Dr. A. C. Ross, a Mdewakantonwan (one of the seven original tribes of the Dakota Nation), who grew up on the reservations of South Dakota, draws some parallels between Jungian psychology, Dr. Roger Sperry's information on brain hemisphericy and Native Americans. It is fairly well recognized that most of society emphasizes left-brain functions (logic, reading, writing, and time orientation), "(c)onsequently, we live in a left-brained world...(r)esearch explained that the culprit was the educational systems. Our educational systems over-emphasize the functions of the left side of the brain" (Ross, 1989).

He goes on to say that answers to questions will come to those who think, and it will not be necessary to ask someone for the answer. A students should "discover his own answer, (because) his understanding and retention of that experience are much greater...(i)n the case of American Indians, a majority would be right-brain dominant" (Ross, 1989).

Traditionally, in order for Native American adolescents to learn best, they must be shown how to do something rather than told, then they practice by themselves until they are able to perform the task rather than being asked to compete or perform in front of their classmates. It is not unusual for students to help each other, which should not be construed as cheating, because they do not want to draw attention to themselves by finishing first or learning something before someone else and being recognized for it.

Self-esteem is greatly related to student achievement and teacher success. Letting students believe they are worthwhile and deserve the respect of their teachers and peers is essential. Take away that self-respect and there is no reason to try. Self-esteem is necessary for clear thinking, concentration and effort, not only as a motivational tool.

An important way to build self-esteem in students is by showing them how to take responsibility for themselves and their actions, and then trusting them to do it. Students who have not had the opportunity to take this responsibility need to learn to make choices and decisions. They need to see the consequences of their actions on themselves and on others and learn how to solve problems based on their own opinions and judgment.

Among Native Americans there are only two stages in a person's life--childhood and adulthood. Adolescence is not a separate stage, and there is no word in the Dakota language for teen-ager. Children are believed to be the greatest gift from God, and love for them in unconditional. Traditionally, they are not spanked but are disciplined by ridicule, such as saying, "What will people say if you do that?" (Fleming, 1975).

The self-concept of many Native American students is also affected in some way or another by alcoholism. Students and their families and friends who are being emotionally and physically abused as a result of alcoholism will have damaged self-esteem no matter how good the school.

Students need to be taught about alcoholism and to

understand that it is a disease and that they are not responsible for the actions of their relatives, but they must be in charge of their own lives. In the last two or three years, Native Americans have been made aware of the effects of drinking on their unborn fetuses--a disorder known as fetal alcohol syndrome.

"(S)ome experts on the Pine Ridge Reservation estimate that F.A.S. and a related, slightly less serious disorder called fetal alcohol effect are believed to afflict as many as 25 percent of the children born there...without intervention, the odds are good that the cycle of abuse and alcoholism among the Sioux will be perpetuated" (West, 1992).

"There are two children in the Bennett County school system who have been diagnosed as having fetal alcohol syndrome," said school nurse Cindy Baker, "...we have quite a few other kids that teachers can pick out by the characteristics (of fetal alcohol syndrome," (Bennett County Booster, 1992).

Cecilia Recusik, the executive director of the University of South Dakota's Interdisciplinary Center for Disabilities, says the problem lies not just in F.A.S., but in a "host of environmental and social factors." She goes on to say F.A.S. children may come from families where alcohol abuse is considered normal and that she knows of a family with nine children afflicted with F.A.S. who sought assistance from the center, and another with seven (West, 1992). (More information on F.A.S. may be obtained from Michael Dorris' The Broken Cord, a non-fictional account of his own efforts to raise his adopted son who had F.A.S.)

In an effort to stop the cycle of alcohol abuse by Native Americans, and the perpetuation of it by adolescents, two South Dakota Indian communities "have declared alcohol-free zones within a mile radius of their towns. Anyone caught drinking must appear before the tribal court. In addition, council members in these communities, responding to a movement initiated by local youth, are voluntarily taking drug tests to demonstrate their commitment to being drug-free" (Native American Development Corporation, 1988).

The influence of alcohol can be seen in the court records of neighborhood newspapers, school absences and dropouts, teen pregnancies, and alcohol-related automobile accidents. (Most memorable to me was the person who fell over drunk in the snow in my sideyard, froze to death there and was subsequently attacked by neighborhood dogs before being discovered the next morning.)

Gene Standing Bear recalls his friend, Roby Shangreaux. "July 4, 1982, I heard the telephone ringing. I went inside to answer it, and my cousin told me that my friend Roby Shangreaux had just drowned. I said to myself, 'That can't be true. Why I just saw him the other day. We were making plans for the party we were going to have for my birthday tomorrow.

"To this day I still can't believe he is gone...We ran around on foot, through draws, up and down hills. What are just little holes in a hillside now seemed like big caves to us when we were small. When Roby, Jr. first started learning how to ride horses, he started yelling for me to go first.

Finally, his dad put him on and slapped the horse on the rump, and off he went bouncing from side to side and screaming. About a hundred yards down the road he would fall off, but his dad would just put him back on.

"I remember the first time that he got drunk. He was about 11 years old, and we were living out in the country. He took some beers from his dad and told his parents that we were going to sleep outside. After about a few cans of beer, he went to the bathroom and would come back staggering and tripping over every little bump in the ground. The next day he told me his head was hurting him, so we went walking through draws looking for berries, and drinking cold spring water to help cure his hangover" (Gene Standing Bear, 1983).

An advisory committee for Shannon and Bennett Counties' Johnson O'Malley programs (funded by the federal government for needs of Indian children's education) was elected in 1988. The members were elected by Indian parents at the five public schools in the counties and included Phoebe Running Hawk, Gerald Big Crow, MaDonna Conroy, Lawrence Eagle Bull, Linda Roper, Lavonne Cottier, Almanda Douthit, and Amparing Cottier.

One of the first things they decided they wanted offered to the Indian students in the schools they represent is a program that works to prevent alcohol and drug abuse among students. Then, they decided to use tribal community resources to accomplish it. Four sessions of a summer camp at Red Shirt Table in the badlands are conducted for four hundred Oglala Sioux students ages 9-18.

CHANGING THE WAY THINGS ARE DONE

The South Dakota High School Activities Association sponsors a school drug free program, T.O.R.C.H. (Teens on the Road to Chemical Health). It also conducts training sessions for high school students in living drug- and alcohol-free and encouraging their friends to do the same. In Bennett County High School, for example, students were encouraged to sign a contract with a friend, pledging not to drink or drug for the school year. Those who kept the contract were recognized at the awards assembly at the end of the school year, and were also treated to a school dance in conjunction with Red Ribbon Week, with prizes awarded by local businessmen.

In addition to the T.O.R.C.H. program and others mentioned previously, the following additional activities have proven to be successful in Bennett County High School:

1. Instituting an advisor-advisee program.
2. Cultural programs involving the school and community, i.e., a wacipi (pow-wow) that includes community members with crafts and area dancers, drummers and singers.
3. School climate inventories which result in student and faculty suggestions being implemented.
4. Emphasis on the arts and extra-curricular activities that places these activities on equal footing with sports (many Native Americans are non-competitive).
5. Serving Native American food as part of the school lunch program, i.e., Indian Tacos and wojapi (berry

pudding) (Varejcka, 1988).

It has become a fairly accepted fact, since the rethinking of whether or not Columbus "discovered" America, that American history leaves out nearly everyone who was not a white male. Paul Gray suggests that rather than having teachers, administrators and social commentators decide the content of history reforms, everyone should be involved. This concern comes about partly due to reforms in New York State public schools. State Education Commissioner Thomas Sobol, chose educators to review the curriculum, and the projected result was a hatchet job for the present standards. They were apparently right, and the result was "soporific educationese." The "reforms" would include changing "slaves" to "enslaved persons," ceasing to look at geography from the European viewpoint, and rethinking the joyousness of Thanksgiving (and in Oklahoma of the Land Run?) (Gray, 1991).

Nobody has been able to explain the purpose of teaching history from the Euro-centric viewpoint. It did provide a good discussion in teaching Minority History, when trying to explain how the Africans felt when Europeans "discovered" Lake Victoria and other natural landmarks. Our example was, "How would you feel if someone from Europe came over here tomorrow and announced they had "discovered" the Black Hills?

Two programs that have met with success in multicultural schools are the Human Rights Education Program and the Student Problem Identification/Resolution (SPIR) Program developed by the Community Relations Service, an agency of the U.S. Department

of Justice. Both are programs that could be adapted to fit with multicultural situations in nearly any part of the public school system.

Through the Human Rights Education Program, the challenge was for students and educators to become aware of culture, to be able to step outside individual cultures and look at the separate components that make up the culture. A second task was to see that "our way" is not the only way. The program is designed not to be an inservice to "teach educators to be multicultural" but rather provide opportunity for student interaction.

Some of the main points include on-going courses in human rights education, curriculum planning, support groups and classroom implementation. Teachers are instructed in conflict management and come to see it "not as a matter of right and wrong, but as a problem to be solved...when each party owns responsibility for the conflict and listens to the other (Adams, et. al., 1992).

The SPIR Program focuses on the commonality of the ethnic groups, rather than differences. It has improved school climate, and "provides a means of empowering students and allowing them the opportunity to provide input and...(participate in designing) goals and objectives for the school" (Klugman and Greenberg, 1991).

An outline of the program is as follows: A cross-section of students is chosen to represent the student body. They come from all student groups, not just ethnic groups, but athletes,

gang members, at-risk students, and others who may be seen as being apathetic. The group participates in setting up a two-day workshop at this point.

The groups are divided homogeneously and no administrators or faculty are present at these sessions. This facilitates students being able to verbalize their concerns. Student concerns are compiled into lists and two representatives from each group are selected to serve on a committee to advise administrators in addressing the concerns. CRS (Community Relations Staff) members may participate at this point, and are used to facilitate discussions about possible solutions to problems. Any student suggestions are noted.

CRS staff members meet with the principal to report on the findings and to discuss developing an action plan. In the past, CRS has assisted schools in implementing follow-up activities, conducting teacher training, establishing conflict resolution teams, developing school improvement plans and providing resource materials (Klugman and Greenburg, 1991).

The principal's role in setting the tone is emphasized as essential to the success of the program. He/She must be able to admit that there are problems at the school but at the same time that they can be resolved. Students should be aware that the program is not a game, and that their concerns and suggestions will be taken seriously.

Note: Janet Varejcka, Bennett County High School, Martin SD, received the 1989 South Dakota Principal of the Year award.

TERMS

AIM: American Indian Movement

BIA: Bureau of Indian Affairs

contract school: not a public school or a BIA school, but one run by parents of students and the work is contracted out

hechel lena oyate kin nipi kte: that these people may live

okiciyapo: help each other

quill work: porcupine quills are flattened with the teeth, dyed with natural colors and used as decorations on costumes and Native American clothing

roach: headpiece worn by a male dancer, and made from porcupine quills

wacipi: pow-wow

washichu: white person

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